Nietzsche on Freedom

Robert Guay

One of the very few matters of nearly universal agreement with respect to Nietzsche interpretation, one that bridges the great analytic/continental divide, is that Nietzsche was offering some sort of account of freedom, in contradistinction to the ‘ascetic’ or ‘slavish’ ways of the past. What remains in dispute is the character of this account. In this paper I present Nietzsche’s account of freedom and his arguments for the superior cogency of that account relative to other accounts of freedom, including irony about the possibility of freedom.

The role of an account of freedom is to offer an explanation of the ‘force’ of norms or values that takes this form: this norm is authoritative because of the integral role it plays in my (or our) free self-determination. So there are two basic components of such an account. One is that norms are compelling because they are self-imposed; one adheres to a norm on pain of not being true to oneself. The other basic component is that such norms, although self-imposed, are nevertheless to be understood as constraints because they might (and likely will) conflict with whatever motivational states or preferences that one happens to be moved by. An account of freedom takes for granted that a person’s identity is in some sense distinct from her merely contingent attributes, or at least that a distinction can be made between the acts and preferences that she herself is responsible for, and those that are externally imposed. We recognize that certain influences (physical, ideological, etc.) can impose on a person; an account of freedom presents a picture of what it is to rise above or take charge of those influences in terms of holding oneself to certain standards.

The typical interpretation of Nietzsche’s version of freedom is: freedom is whatever certain elite, completely unencumbered individuals say it is. In Heidegger’s influential interpretation, Nietzsche’s account of freedom was the final and calamitous attempt at Cartesian certainty. In his quest for something about which one could not go wrong, this reading goes, Nietzsche characterized freedom as purely subjective determination, thus initiating the end of the metaphysical tradition, and a host of modern ills. That Nietzsche’s account takes this form is agreed upon by both the inspired and the unsympathetic. The detail that remains to be settled, of course, is who these subjective determiners are. That is, although the free are capable of incorrigible self-expression, most of humanity is quite assuredly unfree, and the standard by which one tells the two groups apart remains a subject of debate. Some interpreters make appeal to one of the explanatory terms from the historical account: e.g. ‘active’, ‘free from ressentiment’, ‘affirmative’, ‘masterly’. Others find recourse in one of the seemingly metaphysical notions that can occasionally be found...
in Nietzsche’s texts, especially the unpublished notebooks: Übermensch, will to
power, amor fati.

Such an interpretation of Nietzsche’s account of freedom is not only textually
indefensible, however; it also makes no sense. It would be tedious and inconclu-
sive to review every passage ever cited as manifesting the crucial feature of Niet-
zsche’s account of freedom, but there are some general remarks that can be made.
Such interpretations seem to render Nietzschean freedom into something arbi-
trary, and in particular ahistorical. Nietzsche, by contrast, represented freedom as
a colossal and perhaps unattainable achievement, the very search for which is a
perilous provocation of tragic fate. Simply trying to be oneself is something
heroic, and heroic in part because it can go very, very wrong.

I submit that the received interpretation excludes any means of making sense
of the possibility of going wrong, however – and that this thereby excludes the
possibility of ‘getting it right’. Mere idiosyncrasies become laughable when
brought into the open as supposedly normative; as such they justify or validate
nothing. To make something significant of one’s freedom, one must ‘put the
stamp of a binding law and compulsion . . . on what is most personal’ (GS370).
And for Nietzschean freedom to be a tragic-heroic pursuit rather than sheer
impulsiveness, this has to be something of a challenge. Nietzsche’s frequent
admonitions about the stupidity of passion or feeling per se also speak against the
attribution of a careless subjectivism:

Feelings and their origin in judgments. ‘Trust your feelings!’ – But there is
nothing final or original about feelings: behind feelings stand judgments
and evaluations which we inherit in the form of feelings (inclinations,
disinclinations) . . . . To trust one’s feelings – means to obey one’s grand-
father and grandmother, and their grandparents, more than the gods
who are in us: our reason and our experience. (D35)

The awkwardness of subjectivism in Nietzsche’s account of freedom also brings
up some related interpretive difficulties. Two desiderata for any interpretation of
Nietzsche’s account of freedom are that it can be reconciled with Nietzsche’s crit-
ic arguments, and that it can be reconciled with Nietzsche’s historical argu-
ments. If the purely subjective joyous self-affirmation of noble Übermenschen
constitutes freedom, then this has to be specified in a way that exempts it from
the critical standards quite effectively employed to reject others’ accounts of
normativity. And Nietzsche also seemed to suggest that a particularly historical
form of self-understanding (perhaps available through ‘genealogy’) was neces-
sary in order to distinguish oneself as free. In particular he suggested that there
was something particular about the present: it is both exceptionally awful and
ripe with potential to an unprecedented degree. The received interpretation
makes it impossible to capture any of this.

The fundamental interpretive problem with all of the proposed solutions to the
question of what constitutes Nietzschean freedom, however, is that none of the
notions invoked seems to have any independent explanatory force. Even if the
active/reactive dichotomy, or quanta of will to power, is correctly identified as the mark by which one is distinguished as free, then much is still lacking. These notions take their sense from the accounts in which they are embedded: in the case of the historical notions, the genealogical account of the value of values, and in the case of the seemingly metaphysical notions, the critique of whatever metaphysical notion (e.g., free will, the moral subject) that Nietzsche happened to be considering at the time. They stand at the end of an explanation of something other than freedom: the invention of the bad conscience or ethical innovation, for example. Divorced from these contexts and rendered into a general theory of freedom, these notions lack sufficient content to distinguish free from unfree, even in theory. Of course it is generally not likely that the typically-invoked notions are in fact the center of Nietzsche’s account of freedom. The historical notions, in particular, are oddly archaizing: Nietzsche used them to explain very remote phenomena, not to assess the present. But even if they were correctly identified as the crux of Nietzschean freedom, they could only be half the story.

The argumentative difficulties with the received interpretation are just as severe. The form of such interpretations is: this is the standard that distinguishes free from unfree. But appeals to some standard are question-begging in two respects. First, one can reasonably ask, ‘why this standard and not some other?’ This is a banal sort of complaint, but most interpreters are compelled to argue either that it did not concern Nietzsche, or that he had a metaphysical realist answer, explained most likely in terms of eternal recurrence. The problem with metaphysical realist answers in general, and especially in the context of Nietzsche, is that facts still leave open the question of what our recognition of them should consist in. This is the second respect in which an appeal to some standard would be question-begging. The purpose of an account of freedom such as Nietzsche’s is to explain what it is for norms to be compelling. Nietzsche’s freedom account as usually interpreted explains this by offering another norm. It says: you are free, and hence the ideals by which you live are compelling, if and only if you will the eternal recurrence (or some other solution). But, as Nietzsche remarked, ‘I am too curious, too questionable, too prankish for any gross answer’ (EH.clever.1): the authority of any putative norms is exactly what is in question. Finding a general standard to explain this is not helpful, because you would need another explanation to explain the general standard. Any purported norm provokes a question as to why it should hold sway over us, and any reason then offered would seem to be similarly inconclusive. And we, for whom normativity is an issue, are ‘questionable’; who or what we are, that is to say the character of our freedom, is at stake in the matter.

So despite the unavailability of any ‘gross answer’, Nietzsche seemed to be proposing a freedom account that was standard in form: rather than offering a substantive measure of ethical superiority, it explains normativity in terms of self-imposed constraints. There is considerable textual evidence for this interpretation. That freedom is to be understood in terms of constraints that are self-imposed renders transparent otherwise inexplicable passages: ‘For what is freedom? That one has the will to taking responsibility for oneself’ (TI.9.38). A
similar characterization of freedom is ‘the right to make promises’ (GM.II.2). In both cases what distinguishes freedom is not license but placing a lasting burden on oneself. The case of promise-making is especially clear: in making a promise one commits oneself to do something whether or not one wants to. What ‘taking responsibility for oneself’ might amount to is not as clear, but it does illuminate well the nature of Nietzschean freedom: that who one is is itself the product of one’s own activity, and something for which one can in some sense be held accountable. More traditional invocations of freedom as self-imposed constraint appear with ‘autonomy’ (GM.II.2), ‘obeying oneself’ (TSZ.II.12), ‘compulsion to one’s own lawgiving’ (BGE262), ‘constraint and perfection under a law of their own’ (GS290), ‘imposing limits’ (UM.II.1), and self-legislation:

We, however, want to become those who we are – those who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. Therefore we must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become physicists in order to be creators in this sense. (GS335)

Nietzsche’s existential physicist of course does not concern herself with natural law and natural necessity, but with the constraints that one imposes on oneself to become governed by one’s own laws and thereby to become oneself.

That she must be a physicist stems from the form of any good account of freedom. A freedom account needs to construe the imposition of constraint as something originating with the person, not only as part of her own activity, but as representing a particularly ‘deep’ commitment. That is to say, the constraint must be something that she would be loath to revise, or on Nietzsche’s account, a ‘spiritual fatum’ (BGE231) akin to natural law that she could not revise on pain of losing her identity. So there is a tension inherent to accounts of freedom, including Nietzsche’s: norms are ultimately explained as themselves the product of human agency, but there has to be some possible objectivity as to what counts as genuine self-origination in order for the account to explain anything. An account of freedom fails in the cases – Augustine, perhaps, at one extreme and Sartre at the other – where this tension is lacking. It lapses into another kind of account, one concerning some metaphysically-given constraint on norms.

The recognition of this tension explains the generality of Nietzsche’s interests. His focus was on matters of normativity to the exclusion of ethical principles: the question of why we should take anything as authoritative is omnipresent in Nietzsche’s discussions, while the specification of rules to live by is absent. An account of freedom cannot be too specific as to what counts as free self-imposition, at the risk of not leaving enough room for the activity of the person. Accordingly Nietzsche declared at the beginning of his career that who reads him must meet this condition: ‘he may not expect new tables as a result’ (ZB761). Rather than resolving substantive matters, Nietzsche wanted to address what would count as a resolution of such matters. His ‘task’ was thus ‘to solve the problem of value, to determine the order of rank of values’ (GM.I.17n), and he conducted his
discussion in terms of ‘ideals’ and their ‘force’ (HA.I.227), ‘compulsion’ (BGE188), or ‘authority’ (TI.9.39). Another formulation of his ‘task’ clarifies the generality of Nietzsche’s project and the many dimensions of the problems involved:

My task of preparing a moment of the highest self-examination for humanity, a great noon when it looks back and far forward, when it emerges from the dominion of accidents and priests and for the first time poses, as a whole, the question of Why? and For What? – this task follows of necessity from the insight that humanity is not all by itself on the right way, that it is by no means governed divinely, that, on the contrary, it has been precisely among its holiest value concepts that the instinct of denial, corruption, and decadence has ruled seductively. (EH.D.2)

With a ‘highest’ self-examination, and the posing of the question why ‘as a whole’, Nietzsche insisted on the priority of a most general inquiry before particulars could be resolved. As a ‘self’ examination, such an inquiry concerns the character of our freedom. To arrive at an answer we must look ‘back and far forward’, that is, we need both historical understanding and prospective appraisals; emerging from the ‘dominion of accidents’ requires that we look for something necessary, the ‘spiritual fatum’. The form of an answer is that of an answer to ‘the question of Why? and For what?’: something that connects reasons and purposes in the resolution of the status of norms. That objectivity is at issue is apparent from the ‘insight’ that something has gone wrong with our self-determination, that it is not guaranteed to go right.

So on this line of interpretation, freedom does not function as a substantive ideal that somehow outweighs or supersedes other putative ideals. Nietzsche did not claim any intrinsic value for freedom or self-creation per se, or if he did then it was only of subsidiary importance. The account of freedom does not promote a ‘free’ life as especially valuable or identify practical ‘getting it right’ with self-creative activity. The role of freedom in Nietzsche’s ethics, and indeed in his thought as a whole, is instead to offer a kind of explanation of what ‘getting it right’ might amount to. And in producing such an explanation, Nietzsche does not invoke any central, guiding notion, even freedom itself; he cannot claim to have discovered a special, force-conveying explanans, since that is what is at issue. Indeed, ‘freedom’ is something of a heuristic in my interpretation: in discussing the issue that I have identified, Nietzsche was just as likely to use any of a number of reflexive nouns (‘self-mastery’, ‘self-overcoming’), existential worries (‘the problem of the value of life’), or simple but enigmatic appeals to ‘health’ and ‘life’. The integrity of the subject-matter as concerning freedom relies on it representing Nietzsche’s response to a problem that he deemed pressing: how we might come to take anything as justifying or explanatory, and thereby have something by which to assess the possibility or success of our self-determination. His account must accordingly explain normative force as arising out of the general self-imposed reflective and sense-making demands of leading a life, rather than attempt to identify anything inherently explanatory.
The result, of course, will not be a general theory of what normative forcefulness is: an appeal to freedom does not explain why a certain chess piece moves only in straight lines, or why the law of non-contradiction holds. But particular norms and standards have their places in the context of more general presuppositions, practices, or outlooks that are themselves unjustified. So Nietzsche’s claim was that to justify anything more than tentatively requires a defense that becomes more and more general until it finds its limit in coming to an authoritative mode of self-direction. Of course this still leaves room, as there should be, for substantive ideals in Nietzsche’s ethics. ‘Health’, ‘honesty’, ‘freedom from resentiment’ and so on might even be constitutive elements of freedom; they are certainly more likely than freedom to function in an explanation of particular assessments. But insofar as they purport to have a special claim on us (or anyone) for belief- or action-guidingness, the status of these claims requires some sort of explanation. And this is the function of the account of freedom (or ‘independence’ or ‘sovereignty’) as self-imposed constraint.

Nevertheless, some find it problematic to attribute any role to constraint. The supposed hindrance to taking constraint of any kind as central to Nietzsche’s account of freedom is the asceticism that it would seem to involve. Nietzsche did recognize that self-imposition of constraint has an ascetic heritage. But the very quest for freedom, Nietzsche argued, is ascetic. One can make this into a familiar point: one might sometimes have to resist immediate impulses, or even deeply-held convictions, in order to accomplish what one wants or simply to be true to oneself. This can happen in individual contexts, as when one holds oneself to a diet or an exercise regime, or finishes a dissertation. But it also arises in social contexts, as when being oneself requires that one respect another’s autonomy, resolve a dispute with a loved one, or cooperate with a friend. Nietzsche argued even more generally, however, that the very distinction between impulses and true wants, or the very demand for self-determination, is ascetic. By creating a forum in which to hold oneself accountable, it calls for sacrifice, or at least potentially painful ‘defiance of oneself’ (HA.I.137), where this is unnecessary. Nevertheless Nietzsche offered two considerations to mitigate the asceticism of freedom. Although striving for freedom is ascetic, it is not ascetic per se. Morality, for example, contributes to its own demise because it takes reasons as authoritative precisely because they are self-abnegating; the ascetic ideal in general is not remarkable because it values that which requires sacrifice, but because it values sacrifice for its own sake. Secondly, although the self-imposition of constraint has an ascetic heritage, trying to escape from constraint would be even more deeply ascetic, in a way that I shall explain below.

According to Nietzsche, ‘If one tethers one’s heart very severely, one can give one’s spirit many liberties’ (BGE87). Nietzsche argued that this is so because constraints are themselves expressive, not in the sense of non-cognitive, but in the sense of creating content where none existed before. His arguments stem from Kantian insights about formal constraints: the a priori forms of sensible intuitions are themselves intuitions, for example. In general, Kant observed that the delineation of necessary formal characteristics could contribute to substantive,
Although non-empirical, judgments. This observation arose out of the critical move of demanding an explanation for the possibility of our knowledge before making a knowledge-claim: the explanation consisted of identifying the form of normative self-regulation required for a particular sort of claim. This necessary regulative background for a claim itself informs the substance of the claim. Nietzsche, obviously, departed from the transcendental framework, but maintained a less structured critical approach. Instead of the necessary conditions for qualifying as something, Nietzsche sought the ‘psychological’ context in which any constraint has its force. His claim was that a constraint can only be understood in terms of a context of persons inventing, imposing, observing, and defying that constraint, and accordingly one can say something substantive about a constraint by identifying the general context in which that constraint is taken as such. It is not productive to assess constraints in terms of their veridicality, but they have a practical, public background of effect, and can thus be assessed in terms of their meaning.

The expressivity of constraints was that which Nietzsche’s occasional invocations of ‘will to power’ were meant to illustrate: ‘all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation’ (GM.II.12), and ‘all meaning is a will to power’ (KSA.XII.2[77]). More frequently, however, Nietzsche argued his point in a more straightforward manner. To be engaged in a particular activity involves conformity to standards that obtain independent of that performance. The possibilities of action are thus only distinct against a context of standards; in the complete absence of any such constraint, there would be no means by which to make sense of that activity as such. Constraints are thus productive: they create the possibility of novel activities. Obviously, they do not make possible behavior that was previously impossible: one can always write a fourteen-line poem in blank verse, or wear a hairshirt. But such behavior takes on its significance only when considered as undertaken within a system of constraints. And, argued Nietzsche, the constraints do not merely delineate the ways in which activities are meaningful, but they are also themselves meaningful. The background of constraints is itself meaningful because constraints, like language, are intentional: they are about something. This stems from the practicality of constraints. Constraints are about something because in order for a constraint to obtain, it must be taken as such; it must have some practical import, if not actually affecting actions then at least weighing as a possible consideration. So with anything taken as constraint one can ask how it fits more generally into a picture of human purposiveness: what ends are served through that constraint, and how. Nietzsche accordingly spoke of the ‘expediency’ of the ascetic ideal, and drew conclusions about cultures from the knowledge that their artistic production was dominated by classicist ideals, static convention, or mannerist style.

Nietzsche’s arguments concerning the expressivity of constraints explain why he deemed the striving for freedom through avoidance of constraint to be supremely ascetic. Our actions as unconstrained render us not independent so much as ungrounded; the absence of constraint leaves us without the resources to make sense of our actions or ourselves. Without being able to hold ourselves to
a standard, we lack the ability to distinguish free self-determination from being moved by external compulsion. This contention contributed to Nietzsche's famous account of the 'emptiness' or 'meaninglessness' of modernity:

Therefore the individuals in the ancient world were freer, because their ends were nearer and more concrete. Modern man, on the other hand, is everywhere crossed by infinity, just as Achilles in the parable by Zeno the Eleatic: infinity checks him, he never once catches up to the tortoise. (HC790)

Nietzsche, not uniquely, depicted the modern world as the product of humanity's continual self-liberation from traditional authority. His original observation was that this loss of traditional authority without anything to replace it has left us even more deeply dissatisfied than before. Our intolerance of constraint has rendered us unable to see any commitments as particularly worthwhile. This leaves no point to our self-direction, making our individuality something arbitrary or inconsequential. Modern personality is nothing but a confluence of incoherent elements, incapable of self-governance, so 'today the individual must first be made possible by being pruned' (TI.9.41).

So freedom on Nietzsche's account is not extrication from every sort of necessity, but a self-relation that is inexplicable in natural terms: holding oneself to self-imposed standards. This is why it is that, 'in ascetic ideals, so many bridges to independence are revealed' (GM.III.7). 'Ascetic ideals' have provided the means to make sense of the self-relation, both in terms of having created particular restrictions, and, more generally, as 'anti-natural' (GS1 inter alia), in terms of construing freedom in normative rather than causal terms. Nietzsche was of course exceptionally clear on the failure of the ascetic ideal, but its invocation here does indicate the two main issues in the freedom account. First, that ideals are involved indicates the generality of the relevant constraints. Nietzsche was not particularly interested in first-order rules for behavior, but in the overall structures of ethical outlooks. In contrast with, for example, the rules of chess, the constraints that are significant for freedom must be so fundamental that they cannot be taken as rules that one can find and choose to observe or ignore. The relevant constraints are bound up with what it would be to make such a decision oneself; since they are the means for distinguishing non-arbitrary decision-making, they must be unavoidable, except at the cost of loss of self. The other main issue is the rigor of the constraints. The constraints serve to exclude all that is not genuinely self-originating, and this, in Nietzsche's critical eye, is almost everything. The 'psychological' formulation of the burdens of self-determination runs in this way:

The psychological problem in the type of Zarathustra is how he, who says No, who does No to an unprecedented extent to everything to which one had previously said Yes, can nevertheless be the opposite of a Nosaying spirit. (EH.TSZ.6)
A thoroughgoing denial that is itself ultimately affirmative constitutes the path to becoming oneself.

The obvious question that remains is by virtue of which constraints is it possible to construe ourselves as free? Or, if that question is impossible to answer, then, how would we know what constraints would count as genuinely self-imposed? This is where the novelty and radicalism of Nietzsche’s account of freedom enters: he insisted that nothing could possibly count as decisive in resolving these matters. There can be no a priori determination of the content of freedom, argued Nietzsche, because any such determination would not be self-originating. It would be an external constraint on freedom, and as such nothing more than a dogmatic claim for authority. Any putative claim of authenticity or genuine self-determination is accordingly subject to critique: the demand for an account, at the least, of why we should take that claim as authoritative. Although we need standards to be who we are, there are no settled standards that lead us to our standards. Nietzsche characterized the issue in terms of an intense reflexivity that freedom would have to consist in:

A virtue must be our invention, our most personal need and self-defense; a virtue in any other sense is merely a danger. What is not a condition of our life harms it: a virtue that stems purely from a feeling of respect for the concept ‘virtue’, as Kant would have it, is harmful. ‘Virtue’, ‘duty’, ‘the good in itself’, the good with a character of impersonality and universal validity – all phantasms in which the decline and final exhaustion of life, the Königsberg Chineseness, expresses itself. The most basic laws of preservation and growth demand the opposite: that everyone invents his own virtue, his own categorical imperative. (A11)

This passage is often cited as a call to subjectivism, but the use of the first-person plural, as well as the invocation of a binding and general legal requirement, speak against that interpretation. The difference with Kant, which is genuine irrespective of the accuracy of Nietzsche’s Kant interpretation, concerns Nietzsche’s denial of reciprocity between morality and freedom. Morality is harmful because we are not well represented by its demands. Anything that counts for us as decisive, according to Nietzsche, must be such as self-imposed. But the moral law, as universal law, is insufficiently reflexive: we do not give ourselves a reason to adhere to it so much as it is its own reason. For the moral law to have an indisputable claim on every agent merely qua agent, it must stand outside of free self-imposition, rather than be something that anyone has a reason to recognize. As something that is supposed to be inherently justifying, concluded Nietzsche, it cannot be part of our free self-determination.

Nietzsche’s rejection of any constraint or standard not thoroughly self-originating did not derive merely from the general formal demands of an account of freedom; it is also the result of his historical account. However one interprets the significance of genealogy in Nietzsche’s thought, two points should be clear: that constraints play an essential role in any striving for freedom, and that every hope
for some source of exogenous constraint has been conclusively dashed. In Niet-
zsche’s ‘psychological’ reading of the history of morals, moral schemes are
assessed by how well they have turned out to serve human purposiveness, and
everything so far has been a failure. This is nihilism: nothing has proven success-
ful, even on its own terms, in serving as a basis for self-direction. The ethical
immediacy of mythical nobles fell apart on the slightest examination; ressentiment
is essentially reactive, so its own ‘triumph’ (GM III.14) led to it being directed
back against itself (GM III.15); the expedient of the ascetic ideal ‘offered man
meaning’ (GM III.28) for a while, but to ‘will nothingness’ (GM III.28) turned out
to be defective, too. Every ideal or morals, according to Nietzsche, has been an
answer to the question of how to live and how to understand life. But every
answer so far has committed suicide: it has destroyed its own self-understanding.
So the final assessment was that any moral scheme structured by putatively
exogenous constraints does not work; it fails to live up even to its own internal
standards. There are no viable external sources of authority: not fear, not
violence, not nature, not God, not politics. There can accordingly be no given on
what constraints constitute our freedom, or how we determine what constraints
are ours.16

So the problem of freedom as Nietzsche posed it encompasses not merely what
freedom is or might be, but also what activity might count as the product of free-
dom, what considerations would help to resolve these matters, how we might
determine what considerations are salient, and so on. This generality of the prob-
lem of freedom extends even to notions of agency and practical reason. That is,
no notion of agency or practical reason is in itself helpful in regulating the deter-
mination of freedom because those notions, too, are part of a standpoint that
needs to be defended as the product of our self-determination. Nietzsche’s histor-
ical account did not merely argue for the failure of obviously external sources of
constraint. Nietzsche also argued that the very quest for freedom, with its entire
theoretical framework of agency and responsiblity, itself represents a commit-
tment to a particular way of life. ‘Men were considered free’, according to Niet-
zsche, ‘so that they might be judged and punished’ (TI.6.7); the very taking
ourselves as potentially free – as agents rather than passionate machines or
puppets of history – manifests an ideal. ‘The philosopher’, therefore, ‘should
claim the right to include willing-as-such within the sphere of morals’ (BGE19).
Agency per se is not the rigid structure of our self-determination, but one of its
products; including it within the sphere of morals identifies the question of how
we determine what counts as the product of an agent as a practical matter, tied up
with general questions of whether we should be living in a way in which we
construe and assess our behavior in these terms.

The very generality of the problem of freedom leads to what Nietzsche called
‘the enigma of liberation’ (HA.I.preface.7): one cannot determine what
constraints count as genuinely self-imposed without knowing what freedom
consists in, and one can only determine what freedom is in terms of constraints
that are genuinely self-imposed. This enigma arises because no consideration in
itself counts as decisive in settling any aspect of the problem. There can be no
fixed points in determining the character of freedom because anything that we might take as such, even the character of freedom itself, falls within the scope of our free self-determination. In order to serve its argumentative function in explaining normativity, freedom cannot consist in matching up to an independently existing order of what counts as free; this would leave unanswered the question of why this order should be taken as authoritative. Freedom accordingly must consist in somehow inventing in a free way, so that who one is as well as the boundaries of one’s activities are determined in the process.

In Nietzsche’s account of freedom, anything that could possibly help to determine the content of freedom is itself part of freedom. As Nietzsche said, ‘Das Thun ist alles’ (GM.I.13) – the doing is everything. To be free, that is, is not to be an ontologically distinct kind of being, but to be capable of carrying out activities in a standard-governed way; and for the doing to be everything means that the relevant standards are ones to which we hold ourselves, and not ones that are justifying independent of our taking them as such in the context of our activity. This aspect of the freedom account is thus the complement of Nietzsche’s famous arguments concerning the value of truth. Just as standards of freedom or genuine agency are not independent of our attempts at self-determination, that the value of truth is ‘questionable’ implies that practical considerations are ultimate in the regulation of belief. Since nothing from outside our practices can conclusively regulate either our actions or our beliefs, a realist account of freedom, or of anything else for that matter,17 is only possible given resolution of questions of how to live.

From this comprehensiveness of the practical, Nietzsche drew two conclusions. First, he inferred that a complete self-consciousness is impossible. Since authentic selfhood is governed by open-ended considerations rather than pre-existing measures, standards of self-assessment are only prospectively, or as Nietzsche said, ‘experimentally’ (HA.I.preface.4) available. ‘To become what one is’, accordingly, ‘one must not have the faintest notion what one is’ (EH.clever.9). But the other conclusion that Nietzsche drew from the comprehensiveness of the practical is that ‘doing’ potentially generates its own standards of self-assessment. If the standards are not exterior to the ‘doing,’ then there are no risks of failure in self-determination beyond those of shortcomings in our process of reflection, reason-giving, understanding, and revision. Living a life has its own horizon of success and failure, and its own internal means of self-correcting self-guidance; the comprehensiveness of the practical implies that there is no other horizon.

So whereas past moralists attempted to identify a secure and ultimate basis for norms and values, the labor that they actually succeeded in carrying out, according to Nietzsche, was one of invention. Seeking, proposing, and acknowledging a firm basis of ethics might not have succeeded on its own terms, but it has worked to organize ways of life. ‘Whenever we come across a morality’, Nietzsche insisted, ‘we also find a valuation and a rank-ordering of human inclinations and actions’ (GS116); and claims about the veridicality of morality have been less important than what they have accomplished. By establishing our priorities and
providing a structure for our sense of what is important and how to understand ourselves, they have created new possibilities for human agency and new versions of freedom. The failure of morality is thus the presentiment of a possible success. The story that Nietzsche told about humanity was one of its attempting to structure its life by exogenous standards, unaware that these standards are invented; gradually becoming aware that its standards and its way of life are its own creation; taking this awareness alternately as grounds for license or despair; and finally, reconciling the fictive character of its self-discoveries with their possible objectivity. A complete version of this story occurs in the first part of Beyond Good and Evil, ‘On the Prejudices of Philosophers’. In that version the asceticism of the will to truth is replaced by a period in which ‘one could not distinguish between “inventing”’ and “finding”’ (BGE11), which in turn leads to the possibility of a greater self-understanding:

The new psychologist, by putting an end to the superstition that has so far grown with an almost tropical luxuriance around the idea of the soul, virtually casts himself out into a new wasteland and a new suspicion – it may be that the older psychologists had a more comfortable and cheerful time – eventually, however, he finds that precisely thereby he condemns himself to invention – and – who knows? – perhaps to discovery. (BGE12; emphasis added)

The point of this story is to explain how our self-governance goes wrong, and thereby to point toward some chance for its future viability. It goes wrong when organized around purportedly ‘found’ entities such as the soul. Rejecting such superstitions still leaves us in a ‘wasteland’, however, since that leaves us without any standard of genuine self-governance. But the inventiveness that replaces superstition culminates in discovery: it becomes manifest in a way of life in which self-understanding is possible. Thus we come to Nietzsche’s account of freedom: a self-correcting enterprise of self-invention that is coincident with self-discovery. In other words, the standards by which our freedom is to be assessed are: the ones that we make up, but also the ones that we find to be structuring the way of life that we lead and revise by our own lights. The critical strain between the ideals that we happen to have and our freedom consists in the self-generated practical issue of whether we can put our inventiveness into effect:

Was that what my ‘a priori’ demanded of me? that new, immoral, or at least unmoralistic ‘a priori’ and the alas! so anti-Kantian, mysterious ‘categorical imperative’ that spoke through it and which I have in the meantime listened to ever more closely, and not merely listened? (GM.preface.3)

Freedom requires that one ‘listens’ to the ethical demands that obtain, but ‘not merely listen’: one creates the demands that one listens to, and lives by them, too. Nietzsche explained how a process of inventing could at the same time be one

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of discovery in terms of meaning. Meaning is something that is obviously made rather than simply found, but at the same time obtains independent of anyone's subjective state. Any sort of directed activity is meaningful, and once meaning has been thus 'invented', it is open to discovery:

Since we have for millennia looked upon the world with moral, aesthetic and religious demands . . . the world has gradually become so remarkably variegated, terrible, soulful, meaningful, it has acquired color – but we have been the colorists. (HA.I.16; emphasis altered)

Although they depend on an environment of human purposes, the meanings of things pertain to what has become of 'the world': they are settled by what is the case. To interpret an artwork, the institution of marriage, 'the ascetic ideal', liberal democracy, or our age is to make a corrigeable claim about what it is. So when Nietzsche sarcastically answered the question 'In which era do we live?' with 'In which do you live?' (HA.II.2.64), his point was that some characterization simply obtains, however subject to contention it might be, and further that this description might have ethical implications. Offering an interpretation of something links it with human purposes in a way that potentially informs ethical judgment; not only does it clarify what that something is about, it also, by placing that something in the context of our lives and purposes, clarifies who we are and what our activity is about. In meaning, the subjectivity of mind intersects with the objectivity of social practices: it comprises the deeply personal and the public. By virtue of its connection to our ends and ideals, meaning constitutes our self-understanding and thus delimits our freedom. But at the same time, the independence of meaning from individual volition allows it to offer a constraint that provides for the objectivity of ethical judgment, even if this constraint is not stable or fully determinate.

So the inventiveness of Nietzschean freedom is investing one's life with meaning, making ethical distinction possible. Of primary importance is a meaningful distinction between what counts as genuine self-direction and what does not; more generally, the parameters of our self-understanding and the force of our reasons depend on a fabricated ability to make sense of what considerations are salient and how they are related. Although created, meaningfulness in one's life cannot be arbitrarily posited, except according to the Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning. The meaning of one's life, as with the meaning of anything else, must 'become incarnate' (HA.I.preface.7) according to Nietzsche: it depends not only on one's intentions, but also on how others understand it and the effects it produces. That freedom must be established in a public context explains the compossibility of invention and discovery in ethics: this allows for the sense in which it is found and not merely made. And it is in these terms, in which one's freedom is something to be discovered, that the objectivity of ethics can be understood.

Nietzsche’s ethics of freedom is accordingly teleological. Conformity to rule or principle has neither moral nor explanatory primacy. Instead, freedom involves a kind of achievement: the ongoing ability to make sense of one's life on its own
terms as opposed to those of an outside observer. Nietzsche was not a ‘perfectionist,’ however, at least in the typical sense in which one believes that there is some telos of humanity that every person should hope or wish to live up to. An ethics of freedom, according to Nietzsche, is not merely teleological in structure, but self-producerly teleological as well:

Not to remain stuck to our own virtues and as a whole to become the victim of some detail in us, for example our hospitality; this is the danger of dangers among high and rich souls whose traffic with themselves is prodigal, almost indifferent, and who inflate the virtue of liberality into a vice. One must know how to conserve oneself – the hardest test of independence. (BGE41)

To be virtuous – to live up to some standard of goodness – is not only inadequate on Nietzsche’s telling, it is a trap. It presents the danger of coming to identify oneself with one’s virtue, when freedom demands much more: the ability to take one’s virtues and oneself as objects of reflection, assessment, and possible transformation, so that one can determine who one is. As Nietzsche pointed out, ‘whoever reaches his ideal in doing so transcends it’ (BGE73). To take ourselves as potentially free requires that we are not merely the bearers of good qualities, but self-determining beings capable of distanced reflection. So to attain one’s ideal is always that and also to attain a new standpoint, from which one can look beyond it to how to lead one’s life into the future. Perfection is out of the question for Nietzsche because end points are always new beginnings. In the language of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, noon, the moment of perfection in which Zarathustra is ready to die, is also a midnight. (TSZ.IV.19.10)

The imperative of freedom is not to become more virtuous but to ‘become a self’ (HA.II.366). Nietzsche’s ethics is accordingly a meta-perfectionism: instead of progression toward a finish line, it addresses what could count as a finish line. The unavailability of a natural human telos and picture of the virtues demands this higher level of generality. Nietzsche argued, that is, that human nature has failed to structure ethical judgment, and that an account of freedom would have to replace it. Whatever significance that human nature per se could have had has been erased by centuries of ascetic self-overcoming. But this ascetic labor was purposive, directed not to self-improvement but to self-transformation: ‘I doubt that pain makes us ‘better’, but I know that it makes us more profound’ (GS.preface.3). Basic to Nietzsche’s account of freedom is that human effort, by effacing any relevance that nature bore on human character, rendered us accountable for who we are. So human freedom may in fact sacrifice human perfection as its inevitable cost:

Finally, the great question would still remain whether we can really dispense with illness – even for the sake of our virtue – and whether our thirst for knowledge and self-knowledge in particular does not require the sick soul as much as the healthy, and whether, in brief, the will to
health alone, is not a prejudice, cowardice, and perhaps a bit of very subtle barbarism and backwardness. (GS120)

‘Self-knowledge’ trumps even health here, but with the effacement of human nature, what arriving at this amounts to is the accomplishment of an inventive task. So Nietzsche’s proposal was not to try to slough off all the accretions that asceticism has added to our self-conception, returning to something more basic; instead, he would have called this being superficial out of superficiality. Instead, he proposed that freedom replace the significance of human nature with its own self-understanding.

Force in ethics thus ultimately depends on what Nietzsche called sustaining ‘affirmation’. Norms and values are authoritative in terms of their centrality to our freedom, and our freedom is not governed by anything other than its viability. As Nietzsche most concisely expressed it, ‘The only possible critique of morality is a strict and courageous attempt to live in this or that morality’ (D195). Any other critique would be partisan in a way that would make it only as justified as its own partisanship. But the most basic practical question about our self-direction is inevitable if it is to be assessed as self-direction: whether or not it ‘works’. The most basic assessment of how we live is whether or not we bring about a way of life in which we manage to carry out the bare minimum to be expected of a mode of self-direction: durably to generate an understanding of ourselves as freely self-determining. In the absence of external measures, the status of our freedom depends on whether we can succeed in inventing our own objectivity by affirming a life in which meaningful distinctions and applicable, guiding standards obtain.

Although this might not seem rigorous, according to Nietzsche it excludes every version of freedom invented so far. The crisis that Nietzsche found in the modern world is the lack of any guiding purposiveness. Without the structure that such a purposiveness would provide, there is nothing in terms of which to make sense of what to do or what reasons are justifying. In a moment of hyperbole Nietzsche offered the apposition, ‘a loss of meaning and purposiveness, in short, death’ (GM.II.12). His point, although extravagantly made, is clear: to lead a life is to have a direction, and in living one has concerns and commitments that render their objects meaningful. So something has gone wrong when understanding of one’s own ends and reasons is lacking, and this is the critical constraint that affirmation provides: it marks off success not within a life but in leading a life in general. In Nietzsche’s summary, there are three sources of trouble for affirmation: ‘There is no denying that in the long run every single one of these great teachers of purpose up to now has been vanquished by laughter, reason, and nature’ (GS1). Our purposes falter when they lose hold of their meaning and come to seem ridiculous, or when they turn out not to be intellectually viable, provoking more questions than they can answer, or when they simply fall outside the limits of human capacity. They do not seem defective at the outset, but as we grow more demanding they falter and we reject them, requiring the ever-new invention of purposes to continue our striving for freedom.

Individuals are generally responsible for this ever-new invention of
purposes, but it is nevertheless important primarily as instrumental to the social possibility of freedom. The innovators’ lives are not the only valuable ones; on the contrary, what makes them useful is that they are in some way defective:

It is the more unrestrained, much more uncertain, and morally weaker individuals upon whom spiritual advances depend . . . . they are the ones who attempt new and in general many things. (HA.I.224)

Individual inventiveness renews the community in novel ideals and purposes, but even this individuality requires a social context. The category of the individual is a ‘luxury’ (GS 143, BGE 262, HA.I.473) that demands social resources to maintain; at times Nietzsche even suggested that the very distinction between individual and social is spurious or merely quantitative. The language of individuality – responsibility, domination, ‘masks’ – is inescapably social in character, and, more generally, what distinguishes individuality as such is the availability of meanings and reasons that are the product of a particular historical community. So freedom as a sort of achievement requires not just private self-confidence but manifestation in a collective way of life: it represents a social standing and serves a social function. Thus is the “individual” . . . the whole single line of humanity leading up to himself’ (TI.9.33), with the goal of gaining ‘power, by means of which to assist in the evolution of the physis and to be, for a little while, the corrector of its idiocies and ineptitudes’ (UMIII.3). There is no contest in Nietzsche between the lonely individual and the tyrannical crowd – except perhaps within the confines of a particular community. On the contrary there is an interdependence between the social world in general and the persons who live on its margins.

The dependence on historical communities for the social possibility of freedom renders our attempts at self-direction inescapably provisional, however. This provisionality is narrative in its source. On one hand, our commitments to particular norms and ideals are bets about what will turn out to be a viable mode of self-determination. These bets can only be redeemed prospectively, and thus rely on a perpetually unfinished narrative. On the other hand, the bets that we make rely on narratives of a common past that are subject to dispute and revision. One can claim to belong to a different tradition than the one, with roots in ancient Greece, Rome, and Judea, and modern Europe, that Nietzsche identified; one can also draw different conclusions from the same past. For example, one could claim to be wholly original, having invented one’s self-understanding ex nihilo, or one could find a Jacobin lesson in history, that any partially ascetic tradition is doomed to collapse and only a total asceticism would suffice. But however acute this provisionality, radical dispute is limited by the cosmopolitanism inherent to Nietzsche’s account of freedom: all versions of freedom have the same practical burden, of sustaining a way of life that generates its own self-understanding. But even if these issues are unresolvable, that does not preclude there being a fact of the matter, even if our access to such a fact is always disputed and retrospective.

Of course, one can get along in life without a second of concern for freedom,
or agency, or ‘becoming what one is’. And nothing could compel the disinterested to self-determination; any such compulsion would be external constraint. If one has no concern for self-direction, one can opt out of the whole range of considerations. But, Nietzsche insisted, there is no such thing as making a choice against self-determination: the alternative is not settling on unfreedom for oneself, but a passive letting-oneself-be-determined. The failure to set a direction for oneself is just a lack, an absence, rather than a contrary position. And part of Nietzsche’s historical argument was that it cannot be sustained with any scale: it becomes boring on a grand level, making life itself tedious.

So at the bottom of all of Nietzsche’s argumentation was this: nothing could possibly make you engage with concerns about your self-determination. But these concerns represent nothing more than a development of ordinary worries about how to lead a life. Once you get started with them, they accumulate and become strenuous; we have developed well our capacities for suspicion and doubt. But we have a starting point in what we determine to be the historical inheritance of our ethical life, and there is nothing outside of our own capacities for self-scrutiny and revision that directs the process. Self-governance does not consist in anything beyond an internal refinement of the norms internal to leading a life. It was a reformist project in which Nietzsche’s account of freedom played a part. His argument was that our deepest ethical commitments have, on their own terms, failed, but that philosophy could suggest some possible, prospective way out. Philosophical ethics does not escape partisanship, but finds some way for us to revise and extend our commitments, in particular our basic commitment to guiding our own lives.

One might still object that such a reformist project carries no normative weight: since its force is founded on persons’ commitments, it leaves open the possibility for these persons to just ignore it. On Nietzsche’s account, for a norm to be compelling is nothing more than for it to be integral to a practice that one is committed to and that in part constitutes one’s freedom. Norms are the self-imposed conditions for a successful carrying-out of being oneself, and are not answerable to anything outside of what one might come to take as a reason. But one can object that, even granting Nietzsche’s whole account, the status of our normative commitments remains completely unmoored; even if we think of norms as purely internal to practices, and we engage in practices which tacitly recognize certain self-correcting norms, there is no reason to find any of this particularly compelling. Assessments concerning the status of our normative commitments derive their authority from the same source as the commitments themselves, namely from our own allegiance to our own practices, so they irreparably fail to close off the possibility of simply leading a different life. At most it can be shown that leading a certain sort of life has involved certain constitutive norms; it cannot be shown that one must continue on as before.

One can read this sort of objection into Wittgenstein, as the one he made against himself. The mature Wittgenstein was interested in the dynamics of norms as they constitute shared practices; he was most interested in language, but mathematics, psychology, ethics, and aesthetics all shared his attention. Wittgen-
stein observed that norms are part of our ‘natural history’, although norms can take the form of a context-independent demand, describing norms is not fundamentally different from describing practices. Norms are simply the ‘grammar’ or the ‘logic’ of the practices to which they pertain: they are the structural limits of the practice, that by setting boundaries define the possibilities that the practice makes available. Since there is nothing ‘occult’ about norms, on one hand there is no great burden in understanding them: if something about games escapes us, we can appeal to (language) games to help fill out our understanding. But on the other hand it follows that norms are always contingent upon some way of going on, and one can always go on in some novel way. The mundane character of norms makes them familiar, but impotent in constraining how we actually conduct ourselves. So ‘philosophy can in no way interfere . . . . philosophy leaves everything untouched’. Wittgenstein did not claim that normative claims were circular, or relativist, nor did he claim that the logic of practices were what everyone agreed was the logic of practices. Normative claims are dependent not on fixed agreements, but on how everyone goes about things, and this can be dynamic, self-scrutinizing, and self-revising. But because of this very dynamism in practices nothing could possibly constrain everyone from taking off in a completely new direction. No matter how forceful a philosophical case one might make for a particular way of life, this in no way compels anyone to live that way.

Nietzsche arrived at a contrary conclusion: philosophy can resolve questions about the status of norms and set directions for the future. He argued that through our engagement and identification with practices and beliefs, we take up a suitable standpoint from which to assess those practices and beliefs. We are not outside observers of ethical practice; we are right in the middle of it, loaded up with pasts and commitments, and constrained to move in one direction or another. It is not possible to abstain from ethical decision – or at least doing so does not exempt one from the reach of assessment. We have to settle on some way of life, however prospective or hopeful this might be:

... the fact of our existing at all in this here-and-now must be the strongest incentive to us to live according to our own laws and standards: the inexplicable fact that we live precisely today, when we had infinite time in which to come into existence, that we possess only a shortlived today in which to demonstrate why and to what end we came into existence now and at no other time. (UM.III.1)

Nietzsche inferred from this that the aim of philosophy, rather than to obtain some unassailable, exogenous reassurance about the validity of our practices, should be merely to conduct the widest possible internal revision of our practices – ‘Sit as little as possible’ (EH.clever.1; cf. TI.1.34), exhorted Nietzsche, indicating the sort of workout he would have us put our practices through. Our present lives give us the limits of our freedom; the question of how to govern ourselves is nothing more than the practical question of how best to proceed from where we are now. It may not be possible to put a permanent end to self-doubt, but it is
possible to bring critical scrutiny to bear on ourselves. And philosophy can supplement our means to assess our assessments.

For Wittgenstein the entire arc of philosophical aspiration crosses over to irony: our expectations are subverted, and nothing is resolved. One hopes that philosophy will be liberating, and ends up hoping to be liberated from a philosophy that haunts us as nonsense. And unlike that of Socrates, Wittgenstein’s seems to be a pointless, apolitical irony. This is the problem with what seems to be Wittgenstein’s position: he committed himself to a stance that there is no point in maintaining. He thought himself constrained to do so, by a lack of justification for any other position. But for Nietzsche, even resignation is a mode of action; Nietzsche always shifted the dimension of assessment back to the practical. And in this regard Wittgenstein was lacking, having embraced a sort of philosophical caution that could not serve even philosophical ends. Philosophical problems were inescapable for Wittgenstein because he made them inconfrontable. He observed forms of life from the standpoint of a non-participant, so there was no way even to engage the practical problems that concerned Nietzsche.

One could say here that Nietzsche and a Wittgensteinian ironist simply had different conceptions of philosophy. Wittgenstein saw his role as that of observer, or perhaps therapist, whereas Nietzsche envisioned the philosopher as either ‘physician of culture’ or ‘legislator’ of values: the task of the philosopher, for Nietzsche, was to invent novel ways of living that might come to be seen as authoritative. Wittgenstein sometimes saw things this way. He conceded that ‘One might also give the name “philosophy” to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions’, and in a note that mentions Nietzsche refers to the ‘obscure language of prophecy’. But Nietzsche insisted that there is no room for another sort of philosophy: ‘the pathos of “in vain” is the nihilists’ pathos – at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists’ (KSA XII.9[60]).

The problem with the Wittgensteinian project, as with prior, less sophisticated attempts at ‘immaculate perception’, is that it reveals an intense, unyielding allegiance even as it insists that it is impossible (in some ‘ultimate’ sense) to gain assurance about one particular allegiance over another. One is caught in Wittgenstein’s resignation only if one takes his starting place for granted, but as far as Nietzsche is concerned, there is no reason to do this. Even as Wittgenstein conceded the practicality of his judgments (‘the bumps make us see . . .’, ‘what we really want is . . .’), he claimed that philosophy not only serves no end, but also stands in the way of its own purported ends. If philosophy only perpetuates the puzzlement it was meant to cure, then there is no reason to allow oneself to languish in its grips. Wittgenstein here was forced to fall back on the pathos of the philosopher, who simply is absorbed by such matters, with the exculpation that ‘what we are destroying is nothing but a house of cards’. But on Wittgenstein’s own terms, there is no reason to destroy at all; one can engage in philosophy if one finds it diverting, but there is no reason to accord it any authority, and certainly no reason to be tormented by it.

What needs to be explained is not that what seem to be values really are such, but what dissonance there might be between the values that one professes and
how one lives, and between the life that one leads and how one might live better, or at the limits: how one might find a life that sustains affirmation at all. There is no real contrast with what Wittgenstein called ‘bourgeois thought’, that which carries the ‘aim of clearing up the affairs of some particular community’; only bedazzlement by an ideal of what philosophical constraint might be could lead one to think so. The lack of an external standard for assessments might imply that ethical thought is ultimately ‘bourgeois’ tinkering, but there is nothing defective about this. For there to be some way in which philosophy falls short, it takes a Manichean distinction between philosophy and praxis, where the latter is in the same business as philosophy but the former is exclusively effective, or compelling. One can of course look at things in the Wittgensteinian way, but, according to Wittgenstein, nothing compels us to do so. And Nietzsche’s argument was that this constitutes not just a theoretical stance, but a bad way of living; he doubted whether it was even possible, on pain of inconsistency, to be ironic toward one’s whole life in such a manner as to be able to say, ‘This game proves its worth. This may be the cause of its being played, but it is not the ground [Grund]’. According to Nietzsche, there is nothing missing once something ‘proves its worth’: it provides a reason. Those forever ‘running up and down the banks of the river of existence’ (BT18; cf. KSA VII.10[1]) can abstain from ever drawing conclusions, but for those engaged in life, reasons are sometimes authoritative and compelling. And the affirmation of one’s life is contingent on the making of commitments.

But irrespective of the status of any particular commitments, insisted Nietzsche, what is crucial is finding an enduring ‘seduction to life’ (HA.II.1.16, GM.II.7, GM.III.2). Life might turn out to be difficult or unpleasant, and nevertheless be intensely desirable and meaningful. And at the very least, it serves as a horizon within which our questions about particular values make sense. In order for us to judge and evaluate, insisted Nietzsche, our lives have to make sense to us; there has to be a point in living, and a coherence to the meanings and concerns to which we are receptive. And for there to be a point in living, one has to be engaged in life in a manner irreducible to particular concerns. For there to be questions of value at all, we have to hold our commitments and see the world through them; values are a part of life. Thus is life inestimable:

A condemnation of life by the living remains in the end a mere symptom of a certain kind of life: the question whether it is justified or unjustified [ob mit Recht, ob mit Unrecht] is not even raised thereby. One would require a position outside of life, and yet have to know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it, in order to be permitted even to touch the problem of the value of life in general; these are reasons enough to comprehend that this problem is for us an unapproachable problem. When we speak of values, we speak with the inspiration, with the way of looking at things, which is part of life: life itself forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values. (TI.5.5; cf. TI.2.2)
Any estimation of life is a ‘bold insanity of metaphysics’ (GS.preface.2): it presumes that the question of our relation to our lives is a metaphysical one rather than a practical one. But there is no metaphysical question. This is the critical adequacy of freedom: there are no questions to ask beyond what makes for a better mode of affirmation; any attempt to ask such a question is itself part of a very particular and peculiar engagement with one’s life. Being alive makes us partisan in a way that makes it impossible, but unnecessary, to take a detached view on the value of all our commitments as a whole. There is no perspective from which an estimation of life makes sense:

One [Man] is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness, one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole; there is nothing which could judge, measure, compare, or sentence our being, for that would mean judging, measuring, comparing, or sentencing the whole. But there is nothing besides the whole. (TI.6.8)

In evaluating one is caught up in life in a way that makes it impossible to cast judgment on it. In living one loves life (BGE24); what this leaves to be determined is how best to sustain that affirmation.38

Robert Guay
134 E. 17th Street
New York
NY 10003
USA
r_guay@hotmail.com

NOTES

1 Cf. Deleuze 1984.
3 Cf., e.g., TI.5.1.
4 Somewhat comically, Nietzsche declared in a Nachlass note that ‘All feelings of freedom are no longer to be conceived in opposition to constraint’ (cited in Strong (1973: 223)). Nietzsche perhaps later realized that the idea was not original to him. Cf. also TSZ.I.17: ‘You call yourselves free? Your dominant thought I want to hear, not that you have escaped from a yoke . . .’
5 One can perhaps find a parallel to this in the left-Hegelian critique of utopianism: that we shall not know what institutions, if any, are appropriate for us until we are in fact liberated.
6 This is why I shall not discuss prominent views of freedom or self-creation, such as that of Nehamas (1986, 1998): I suspect that they operate on the substantive level, in which case they are not quite in competition with this interpretation. However there seems to be one good reason not to take Nietzsche as offering a substantive version of freedom: as Nehamas notes, there is nothing interesting and general to say about what freedom...
consists in. Such accounts thus tend to what Conway calls ‘voluntarism’ (1997: 71), that is
to say, a kind of arbitrariness. (Note however that Conway specifically says of Nehamas
that he ‘works productively in the interstitial space between volition and cognition’ (1997:
150), which I take to mean that he is not a voluntarist.) For reservations about the very idea
of self-creation in Nietzsche, most of which depend on taking Nietzsche’s invocations of

7 Nietzsche’s version of normativity, to some extent like that of Wittgenstein and to a
lesser degree Hegel, is absolutely general: every claim, even those of logic, mathematics, or
natural science, ultimately relies on the authority of some way of life or practical orienta-
tion for its defense. This puts Nietzsche at something of a cross-current with contemporary
discussions, which focus on normativity in particular domains. For a qualification of this
generality see the subsequent paragraph; for discussions of normativity cf. Dancy (2000)
and Brandom (2001); for a discussion in which I cannot recognize anything distinctly
normative (i.e., differing significantly from disposition to act), cf. Schacht (2001).


Blondel (1987: 17, 52, 100).

10 Of course, I cannot defend the limited explanatory role of the notion of ‘will to
power’ here, but for some observations about its primary or central relevance to the signifi-
cance of phenomena, cf. Pippin (1991: 100f), Nehamas (1986: 91f), and Müller-Lauter (1999:
83–86). Note that ‘will to power’ could, even on this picture, maintain a broad significance:
if there are no inherently explanatory terms, then it may be that the force of any claim is
mediated by the possibility of its meaningfulness, in which case it may be that all norma-
tivity is dependent on semantic normativity.

11 Nietzsche’s concerns here intersect with those of Wittgenstein, specifically with
Wittgenstein’s discussions of rule-following. Although concerned primarily with semantic
facts rather than freedom, Wittgenstein wanted to show that the objectivity of rules
depends on social practices of applying them. So his explanatory interests were in a way
the reverse of Nietzsche’s: whereas Nietzsche wanted to show the productive powers of
applied constraints, Wittgenstein wanted to show that constraints depend on their applica-
tions. For examples of Wittgenstein’s discussions, cf. Wittgenstein (1953), sections
185–219, and Wittgenstein (1967), part VI. For discussions of Wittgensteinian issues of
first to relate Nietzsche to Wittgenstein was, I think, Strong (1975). Another important
similarity that I cannot discuss here is that the constraints or rules in question need not be
explicit; cf. Wittgenstein (1972), section 46: ‘We do calculate according to a rule, and that is
enough’.

12 Similar illustrations of the expressivity of constraints include those, influenced by
Wittgenstein, centered around rule-following, and those, influenced by Foucault, concern-
ing the social construction of identity. The former typically explain games such as chess or
football as constructed out of rules: checkmate or a touchdown are only possible in the
context of a system of constraints on what counts as a legitimate ‘move’ of the game, and
this system of constraints is binding on pain of failure to be playing the game. The latter
represent identity as constructed out of one’s relation to social roles concerning everything
from vocation and family relations to medical and legal status. These social roles are not
so much slots to be filled, but elements of a background against which one’s actions and
identity take on meaning. Nietzsche’s freedom account bears an obvious, as well as a
.genetic, relation to the latter account. But free individuality differs from conventional
social categories, however, in its normative dimension. Nietzsche’s account is distinctive
in its commitment to explaining the suitability of a set of constraints to our self-understanding. That is, to complete his argument Nietzsche must show that a set of constraints is the one that we impose on ourselves as a condition of our freedom. For an example of an illustration influenced by Wittgenstein cf., for example, Brandom (1979: 193ff); for one influenced by Foucault cf., for example, Hacking (1986).

13 The ‘anti-natural’ is such for destroying the explanatory roles of instinct and affect in particular, a loss that Nietzsche described as painful and costly. Prior to the ascetic ideal the primary form of explanation for human behavior prior to the ascetic ideal was ‘this is why that happened’, pointing to natural causes; after the ascetic ideal it was ‘why they did that’, pointing to reasons, or more broadly, ideals.

14 By ‘legal requirements’ I am of course not claiming that they are juridical matters, but merely that by referring (however metaphorically or literally) to laws, Nietzsche is invoking imperatives (‘they demand’) that are lawlike in form or character.

15 Note that since Nietzsche’s account concerns what sort of standard could count as self-imposed and thereby serve to structure self-determination, individual belief or motivation need not play any role in his analysis. He does seem, as a result of his account of the ascetic ideal, to be committed to some form of internalism, one in which norms can be independently motivating. But he does not seem to be committed to any particular account of how subjective motivational states are or are not related to norms or reasons.

16 I discuss these issues at much greater length in my ‘The Philosophical Function of Genealogy’, forthcoming.

17 As Nietzsche famously claimed, ‘physics, too, is only an interpretation . . . .’ (BGE14).

18 The central role of meaning in Nietzsche’s account of freedom explains the generality of the issue of style: that, for example, ‘To improve one’s style – means to improve one’s thoughts and nothing else!’ (HA.2.131) With a style, according to Nietzsche, seemingly unrelated elements are shown to belong together in a directed way; a style, just like an individual, must betray the presence of a single mind behind it, organizing all that falls under its rubric. And since laughter, according to Nietzsche, is occasioned by sudden inversions of meaning ‘in such a way that this event causes no harm and is imagined as occasioned by high spirits’ (HA.I.213), the central role of meaning also explains why ‘comedians of the ascetic ideal’ are the only ones that are capable of harming it; cf. Conway (1997: 105ff).


20 This pace Williams (1995: 68).

21 Cf. HA.II.221 and GS.preface.4.

22 Note however Nietzsche’s remark that ‘even whole families, tribes, or peoples may occasionally represent such a bull’s eye’ that represents ‘a kind of Übermensch in relation to mankind as a whole’. (A4).


25 Wittgenstein (1953: §71; cf. §29).


27 Cf. Solomon (1995: 196): ‘Loose talk about perspectives, as if they were nothing but potential viewpoints, leaves out the critical aspect of Nietzsche’s perspectivism: the fact that a perspective is occupied’.
28 Cf. also GM.preface.2: ‘We have no right to be isolated in any way: we may neither make isolated errors nor come across isolated truths’.
29 For a note of Wittgenstein’s on his own irony cf. Wittgenstein (1980: 9): ‘In this world (mine) there is no tragedy... It is as though everything were soluble in the aether of the world; there are no hard surfaces...’
30 Cf., e.g., HA.II.180, D202, GS299, GS.pref.2.
31 Cf., e.g., BGE211, or ‘Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen’, in KSA I, section 3.
32 Wittgenstein (1953: §126).
34 Cf. TSiZ.II.15 and also BGE204: ‘Philosophy reduced to ‘theory of knowledge’, in fact no more than a timid epochism and doctrine of abstinence – a philosophy that never gets beyond the threshold and takes pains to deny itself the right to enter – that is philosophy in its last throes, an end, an agony, something inspiring pity’.
37 Wittgenstein (1972: §474).
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